

On the vulgar critique of vulgar materialism

By Frank Brenner

Given the analysis we have presented in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* of the growing hold of objectivism over the theoretical and political life of the International Committee, it is worth recalling a controversy within the movement that occurred in 1995 which foreshadows this later theoretical degeneration. The controversy concerned a lecture given by David Walsh called “Social Progress and Contemporary Culture”. An attack on postmodernism from a Marxist perspective, the lecture was delivered at a public meeting at the University of Michigan and printed in early January 1995 in *The International Workers Bulletin*. (The IWB was the print predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which began in 1998. Walsh was the arts editor of the IWB, and has continued to fill that role on the WSWS.)

Immediately following the publication of this lecture, David North took the extraordinary step of publicly rebuking Walsh in a full page article in the IWB on Jan. 30, 1995. There is of course nothing wrong with comrades having disagreements over important theoretical and political issues, but during North’s tenure in the leadership of the movement these disagreements have almost never taken place in public. Still, it would be understandable for North to make his criticisms of Walsh public if there were issues of fundamental importance at stake. But North’s disagreements with Walsh were over precisely two sentences in Walsh’s entire lecture. Did these sentences represent some egregious departure from Marxism? Here they are:

Bear in mind that Marxism has nothing in common with economic determinism. Anyone who thinks the revolution is inevitable has not bothered to look at the wreckage of this century.¹

North’s objections to these sentences were as follows:

Had Walsh included the adjective *vulgar* before “economic determinism” his statement would be entirely correct. Likewise, there could be no objection to a sober rejection of light-minded and complacent assertions that *the victory* of the socialist revolution is inevitable.²

In other words, the controversy boiled down to two words – vulgar in the first sentence, victory in the second. On this flimsy basis, North felt compelled to launch a public criticism of a leading comrade and close collaborator. Of course there can be occasions when even a single word can point to some deeper problem, but was that the case here? We can immediately dispense with North’s objection to the second sentence: it is evident that the victory of the revolution is precisely what Walsh means, since otherwise the last part of his sentence – about the “wreckage of this century,” i.e. the *defeats* of the revolution – makes no sense.

¹ David Walsh, “Social Progress & Contemporary Culture: Why is the notion of progress under attack?” in *The International Workers Bulletin*, Jan. 2, 1995. All further quotes from Walsh are from this lecture.

² David North, “The twentieth century has substantiated the historical conception outlined by Marx,” in *The International Workers Bulletin*, Jan. 30, 1995. Unless otherwise indicated, all further quotes from North are from this article.

So if North had any case against Walsh, it was over the issue of economic determinism, and this is indeed the principal theme of North's statement. North chose to read Walsh's remark as an attack on the foundations of Marxism: he accuses Walsh of "having severed the decisive link between the process of historical development and its essential economic foundation." In other words, according to North, Walsh's remark amounted to a denial of the objective contradictions of capitalism, and this leads North to accuse Walsh of "a thoroughly skeptical position toward the prospects for social revolution." And all this because of the lack of a single word – vulgar!

But was Walsh's remark about economic determinism an attack on the fundamentals of Marxist science, as North claimed? One only has to read the rest of Walsh's lecture to see that this accusation is preposterous. Early in the lecture, when introducing his main theme of social progress, Walsh declared:

Progress is not a pipedream. Its possibility is rooted in the objective development of society itself. Capitalism has built up the material basis for it: a world economy which could feed, clothe and house the world's population several times over. But while capitalism brings into being a globally-integrated economy, this economy remains trapped within the nation-state system and private property. These contradictions can only be overcome by the working class, the producers of wealth, coming to power on an international scale and reorganizing affairs in a rational fashion, in the interests of the vast majority.

Later on, in the paragraph that immediately precedes the statements that North took exception to, Walsh states:

In the final analysis, capitalist reaction [Walsh was discussing the bourgeois triumphalism in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union three years earlier - FB] is an expression of unresolved economic, political and social contradictions. The postwar order has broken down and world capitalism has not been able to establish a new equilibrium. Objective forces are at work which will vastly alter the present climate. A new mass upsurge of the working class is inevitable.

So, far from downplaying the role of the objective contradictions of capitalism or denying the inevitability of revolutionary crises, Walsh was instead insisting on them – "Objective forces are at work which will vastly alter the present climate. A new mass upsurge of the working class is inevitable." Indeed, with anything resembling a fair-minded reading of even the offending sentences, it should have been abundantly clear from the second sentence that Walsh's reference to "economic determinism" meant precisely the vulgar materialist outlook that conceives of the victory of the revolution as being the inevitable outcome of objective forces.

What then prompted North to launch his broadside at Walsh? To readers familiar with *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, the answer begins to emerge if we look at the rest of Walsh's offending paragraph. After declaring that revolution isn't inevitable, Walsh states:

That is not our task, to reassure and comfort anyone. Socialism is not a historic inevitability. [NB: Walsh makes it clear yet again that what he is talking about is socialism – i.e. the victory of the revolution – not being inevitable – FB.] As Marx explained in *The Holy Family*: "History does nothing, it 'possesses no immense wealth', it 'wages no battles'. It is man, real, living man who does all

that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.”

This is the same passage from Marx that Alex Steiner and I would use a decade later as our motto for *Objectivism or Marxism*, our open letter to the International Committee about the growing theoretical and political disorientation of the movement.³ In his response to us, North angrily claimed that we were “misreading” Marx: this passage was an attack on the Left Hegelians who had apotheosized History into a self-motivating abstraction, whereas for Marx and Engels “the concept of history had to be abstracted from the development of human society.”⁴ This is an evasion typical of North: though it is of course true that Marx rooted history in the development of human society, that wasn’t the point Marx was making here. Rather, Marx’s point was about *human agency* – that humans make their own history (though as he famously emphasized elsewhere, they do so not under conditions of their own choosing).

Marx’s point is relevant not only against the Left Hegelians but against any tendency to abstract history from human agency. And objectivism is just such a tendency: it turns the laws of historical development that Marx discovered into apotheosized Laws of History so as to downplay the significance of political consciousness and revolutionary practice. The struggle to bring socialist consciousness to the working class – one of the great challenges of the socialist revolution – is turned by the objectivist into *an automatic reflex of objective conditions*. Marxist science is thereby turned on its head: it is no longer a guide to revolutionary action, but instead becomes a ‘scientific’ refuge from the difficult work of bringing about the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. Which is why, for all their formal adherence to Marxism, objectivists inevitably bridle at (and, as North does here, try to explain away) Marx’s insistence that “history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.”

Indeed Walsh made essentially the same point I am making here in the paragraph that followed the quote from *The Holy Family*:

History provides the stuff of revolution – the internal contradictions of capitalism, its inevitable crisis, the opportunity for its overthrow – but nothing more. Our activity has a material basis – one couldn’t have made the socialist revolution in the eighteenth century – but, in the final analysis, human beings must fight out the central political questions and make history. What we do, including the people in this room, is decisive.

This quote is yet further proof, if any more were needed, of how utterly baseless North’s attack on Walsh was. “History provides the stuff of revolution – the internal contradictions of capitalism, its inevitable crisis, the opportunity for its overthrow” – there is not a shred of skepticism here with regard to the economic foundations of historical materialism. But it is also a restatement of how Marxists have traditionally understood the quote from *The Holy Family*: “History provides the stuff of revolution ... but nothing more ... in the final analysis, human beings must fight out the central political questions and make history. What we do ... is decisive.” It would be hard to imagine a statement better designed to rankle an objectivist.

³ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf

⁴ David North, *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, p. 139, n. 30.
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/sep2007/marx-s10.shtml>

This gives us the key to understanding this otherwise strange controversy. The real story was not that Walsh was abandoning Marxism, but rather that North was succumbing to objectivism. When Walsh reiterated positions central to Marxism and Bolshevism – that revolution wasn't inevitable, that History with a capital H would not bring about socialism – North bridled at these remarks because they jarred with his 'new' orientation. In a movement that encouraged critical thought among its members, North's rebuke of Walsh should have generated some debate, but there isn't any record of that happening. Instead, North's authority in the movement was such that no one (including Walsh) questioned his views.

Let us see how this succumbing to objectivism manifests itself in North's statement. Having set up Walsh's remark about economic determinism as a straw man, North proceeds to argue that "there is a crucial element of 'economic determinism' in the materialist conception of history." To support this, he quotes a passage from the famous summary of historical materialism in the preface to Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* about the contradictions between relations and forces of production leading to "an era of social revolution."⁵ In truth, hundreds of such quotations could have been adduced since North was simply proving the obvious here – that for historical materialism the economic base of society is the ultimately determining factor in history.

But if there is indeed an "element" of economic determinism within Marxism, what then is *vulgar* economic determinism? This is what North says about it:

Of course, as Engels was at pains to explain, this element of determinism must not be stupidly simplified by dismissing the complexities of the vast superstructural movement through which the historical process as a totality finds expression. However, the mistakes and stupidities of the vulgarizers, annoying as they may be, do not negate the significance of the great discovery of Marx that made it possible, for the first time, to place the study of history on a scientific basis.

Now you would think, given how much the missing word *vulgar* figured in North's rebuking of Walsh, that North would provide some concrete indication, some specific details, about what vulgar economic determinism was. But these remarks tell us very little: the "vulgarizers" are unnamed and what their 'vulgarism' constituted is discussed in only the most general terms. What North does do, however, is convey an impression about vulgar economic determinism: it was a matter of "mistakes and stupidities" on the part of these anonymous vulgarizers, which were "annoying" insofar as genuine Marxism was concerned. (In a similar vein, North referred to "light-minded and complacent assertions that the victory of the socialist revolution is inevitable.") Thus no one reading this could possibly imagine that vulgar economic determinism represented *a major threat to Marxism*; on the contrary, to the extent that this was a problem it was on the distinctly subordinate level of being an annoyance.

What North is doing here, in other words, is *trivializing* the significance of vulgar economic determinism. Yet, towards the end of his statement, North refers in passing to "the objectivist tendencies that characterized the theoretical conceptions of the Second International." So it turns out that the proponents of this "annoying" vulgar economic determinism – i.e. objectivism –

⁵ Marx's preface can be read here: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm>

were none other than the theoreticians of classical Social Democracy. Now, these theoreticians were guilty of a lot more than just “mistakes and stupidities”, they were guilty of a world-historic betrayal of the working class, one which haunted the entire history of the 20th century. So to the extent that vulgar economic determinism figured in that betrayal, it is deeply misguided to trivialize its significance.

(It is true that Engels, whom North references in this quote, treated vulgar economic determinism in terms of “mistakes and stupidities” in his famous letters from the 1890s to Bloch, Mehring, Borgius, etc.⁶ But Engels was long dead by August 1914, after which no one could any longer conceive of the objectivism of Social Democracy merely in those terms.)

By trivializing the threat posed by vulgar economic determinism, North was seeking to open up a space for it. Thus after quoting the preface from Marx’s *Critique*, North declares:

Understood in this scientific sense, the revolution is inevitable; and, contrary to what is suggested in Comrade Walsh’s lecture, the “wreckage” – I think this word is poorly used – of the twentieth century has substantiated the historical conception outlined by Marx in the preceding paragraph.

What does it mean to say that “understood in this scientific sense, the revolution is inevitable”? In fact Marx never says this: he writes instead, “Then begins an era of social revolution,” a much less categorical statement than “the revolution is inevitable.” And Marx goes on to say (in the sentence that comes right after the part of the passage that North had quoted):

In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.⁷

Here it is as if Marx is anticipating (and rebutting) the vulgarization of his ideas that would eventually emerge as the ‘orthodox’ objectivism of Social Democracy. While it is true that the economic transformations at the base of society “can be determined with the precision of natural science”, the same is not true for the “ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.” Of course ideology is not some mystical realm impervious to scientific understanding, but neither is it an automatic and inevitable outcome of objective economic conditions in the manner of a natural-scientific process. If changes in ideological forms cannot be determined with the same precision as economic changes, then this must mean that the former have a *degree of autonomy* with regard to the latter. But it is the ignoring of this autonomy that constitutes the vulgar in vulgar economic determinism. Objectivism is a form of *reductionism* that turns politics, art, philosophy etc. into epiphenomena of economic and class relations, and thereby ignores the specific features and laws of development that characterize these ideological forms. When it comes to socialist politics, objectivism leads to the downplaying of revolutionary practice and of the fight for socialist consciousness. Given that no revolution in history requires a

⁶ See Engels’s letter to Joseph Bloch, Sept. 21-22, 1890: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm ; his letter to Franz Mehring, July 14, 1893: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm; and his letter to W. Borgius, Jan. 25, 1894: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94_01_25.htm.

⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm>

higher level of political consciousness than the socialist revolution, the crippling impact of objectivism becomes evident. The history of the last century attests to the vital importance for Marxists to grapple with *how* “men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”

Thus, North’s claim that “understood in this scientific sense, the revolution is inevitable” is a distortion of Marxism. No doubt North would argue that if his remark is read in context (which he himself chose not to do in reading Walsh’s lecture), there is no such distortion since a paragraph later he attributes the many failures of the revolution to the misleadership of the working class. Yet even in context there is something problematic about North’s remark. The history of failed and betrayed revolutions that North invokes (Germany 1923, China 1927, Spain 1936, Chile 1973 etc.) demonstrates that in a “scientific sense” it is only revolutionary *crises* (which is clearly all that Marx meant by “an era of social revolution”) that are inevitable, and equally, that without the kind of leadership provided by the Bolsheviks in 1917, those crises inevitably end in defeat. Thus one could say with far more justification that in a “scientific sense,” without Marxist leadership – or what amounts to the same thing, without socialist consciousness in the working class – the only thing that is inevitable is the *defeat* of the revolution. (Moreover, to speak of the “wreckage” of the 20th century in regards to the many defeats of the revolution is actually quite appropriate, North’s objection notwithstanding.) Indeed it is the supposedly ‘skeptical’ Walsh who conveys far better than North what Marxists understand by “scientific sense” when he states that, “History provides the stuff of revolution ... but nothing more.”

In any case, given how preposterous the case against Walsh was, North sought to broaden the framework of his argument, and to his end he brought in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. North’s point is as follows:

The devastating defeats of the working class that followed in the wake of 1923, especially the coming to power of Hitler in 1933, played a major role in shaping the form taken by Critical Theory. These defeats were seen as the expression of a bewilderingly complex interaction of autonomous superstructural factors, largely beyond the control of any political movement, that rendered the working class impotent. All references to the “economic base” and “objective revolutionary situations” were dismissed as more or less meaningless, or, even worse, as expressions of economic determinism and vulgar materialism. Indeed, the entire emphasis placed by classical Marxism on the production relations of capitalism was dismissed as excessive and hardly capable of providing an understanding of the political and ideological superstructure of capitalist society.

Now this had major consequences since, for North, Critical Theory lies at the source of postmodernism:

His [i.e. Michel Foucault’s] views, like those of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, can be traced back to conceptions developed by [Georg] Lukacs, [Karl] Korsch and those among their followers [i.e. the Frankfurt School] who developed what became known as Critical Theory.

The conceptions North has in mind here are ones that divorce the economic base from the ideological superstructure. This allows North to round out his argument against Walsh, since the

latter's offending remark about economic determinism can now be seen as amounting to "gratuitous concessions to sophisticated idealist tendencies," i.e. postmodernism via the Frankfurt School.

In considering North's argument, a general point needs to be made. There has never been, either before or after this controversy, a serious study of the theoretical legacy of the Frankfurt School by anyone in the International Committee. By any objective measure, that legacy represents an important chapter in the intellectual history of the 20th century, and in a backhanded way North acknowledges that here with his claim about Critical Theory being the ancestor of postmodernism. Of course that is a claim for importance in a negative sense, but North also concedes that Critical Theory, as it was first promulgated by Lukacs and Korsch in the Twenties, "expressed a legitimate criticism of the objectivist tendencies that characterized the theoretical conceptions of the Second International." This point – hardly an insignificant qualification – is made in passing, which is typical of how Critical Theory or the Frankfurt School are dealt with, on the rare occasions when they are brought up.

(If the Frankfurt School does get mentioned in the IC press, it is typically as a species of "demoralized petty-bourgeois theorists," to cite an epithet from North's polemic against us. The one extended discussion of the Frankfurt School to be found on the WSWS comes in a 2005 lecture by Peter Schwarz, which dealt with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁸ We examined Schwarz's lecture at length in chapter 6 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, demonstrating that Schwarz was "shadow-boxing" with Adorno and Horkheimer, that his analysis lacked historical context and that it failed to address the core problem of the book. We also pointed out that Schwarz made a sweeping, but unsubstantiated, generalization from this book to the work of the entire Frankfurt School. As we pointed out:

Yet even a cursory examination of Martin Jay's classic account of the history of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, demonstrates that Schwarz's decontextualized understanding of the Frankfurt School does not stand up to a closer scrutiny. For the Frankfurt School, while it may be characterized by a common set of themes and interests, was never a homogeneous institution. We don't have to agree with all the premises of the Frankfurt School to note that in its early years in the 1920s it was much closer to Marxism than it would be during its period of exile after 1933 and that it took yet another turn in the postwar period. Furthermore, the different personalities that at one time or another were affiliated with the Frankfurt School were hardly in agreement.⁹

(Moreover, even Schwarz, who characterizes the Frankfurt School as "postwar confusionists" completely at odds with Marxism, also concedes that, "The Frankfurt School criticised certain aspects in the superstructure of bourgeois society in a brilliant manner." Again, as with North's qualification, this remark is simply tossed in as an aside. Where did this "brilliant" criticism come from? It couldn't have come from 'confusionism' (whatever that means), and to ascribe it merely to individual genius explains nothing. Surely the fact that a number of the leading intellectuals of this school – Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno

⁸ Schwarz's lecture, the ninth in a summer school series of lectures, was titled "The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International", WSWS, Oct. 11, 2005:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/le9-all.shtml>.

⁹ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch06.pdf, p. 162. The critique of Schwarz's lecture in on pp. 160-5.

[to say nothing of a seminal intellectual figure like Lukacs] – produced some “brilliant” work suggests that there might be a good deal more to Critical Theory than just the rantings of confused and demoralized petty-bourgeois theorists. But this side of the matter is of no interest to North, Schwarz et al. – even though, as we showed in Chapter 9 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, in the case of someone like Lukacs, his ideas are occasionally cited and endorsed by WSWs writers, including North, when it suits their immediate purpose.¹⁰)

As for North’s claim that postmodernism “can be traced back” to Critical Theory, this is a gross oversimplification. It is true that *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by conflating reason and “instrumental reason”, opened a door to irrationalism, and this did have an important influence on a leading postmodernist like Lyotard.¹¹ But this is a case of the postmodernists exploiting the weaknesses and limitations of Critical Theory rather than any direct intellectual lineage. It is far more true to say that the postmodernists are the progeny of Heidegger and Nietzsche than of Critical Theory. And in that regard, what stands out are the antagonisms between the Critical Theorists and the ancestors of postmodernism, attested to by books like Adorno’s *The Jargon of Authenticity*, an attack on Heidegger, the final sections of Marcuse’s important book on Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, and especially Lukacs’s book, *The Destruction of Reason*, a major attack on 19th century irrationalism.¹² Insofar as the postmodernists were concerned, figures like Adorno, Lukacs, Benjamin, Marcuse etc. were purveyors of ‘meta-narratives’ and, just as bad, ‘utopians’.¹³ A good example of the prevailing attitudes among postmodernists towards the Frankfurters comes from cultural studies, an academic field dominated (and indeed largely

¹⁰ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch09.pdf. See the section, “A Catechism of Approved Authors and the Use of the Political Amalgam”; on the citing of Lukacs in the WSWs, see pp. 247-8.

¹¹ Even with regard to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, it needs to be said that the critique of “instrumental reason” has a good deal of legitimacy and relevance for Marxism, as we explained in Chapter 6 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*:

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer mistakenly conflate “instrumental reason” with reason as such and in that sense open up a door to irrationalism. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as “instrumental reason”. The term is but another name for the constricted and reified concept of science that derives from positivism. (We discussed this issue previously in Chapter 3.) From the standpoint of a Marxist critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, we reject the identification of “instrumental reason” with reason, but at the same time we recognize that “instrumental reason” is indeed a profound social phenomenon of our time. As there is no recognition of the dangers of positivism on the part of Schwarz and North, they have no explanation for how the Frankfurt School can provide any insights about the role of “instrumental reason” and its employment in the “culture industry”.

http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch06.pdf, p. 164.

¹² Lukacs, of course, was never part of the Frankfurt School and eventually grew openly hostile to it, but North’s claim about the intellectual descent of postmodernism from Critical Theory encompasses Lukacs, and so it is valid to take note of the latter’s major work against irrationalism.

¹³ The identification of Critical Theory with the utopian project can be found in the seminal work of postmodernism, Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*:

“...we cannot conceal the fact that the critical model in the end lost its theoretical standing and was reduced to the status of a “utopia” or “hope,” a token protest raised in the name of man or reason or creativity, or again of some social category such as the Third World or the students – on which is conferred in extremes the henceforth improbable function of critical subject.”

Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), <http://marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm>

invented) by postmodernists in the 80s and 90s. As the social historian Thomas Frank notes in an incisive account of that period, the ‘cult stud’ academics came to despise the Frankfurt School critique of the culture industry of bourgeois society:

Generally speaking, cult studs did not frequently apply the term ‘elitist’ to Hollywood executives or TV producers. This was a characteristic they attributed not to the culture industries but *critics* of the culture industries, most notably the same gang of easy-to-hate Frankfurt School Marxists that so pissed off [American sociologist and early cultural studies academic] Herbert Gans. Cult studs tended to see in the work of Marcuse and fellow Frankfurter Theodor Adorno (who once, to his undying infamy, expressed a dislike for jazz) the very embodiment of the snobbery from which academia was only now recovering. In reaction to the uptight squareness of the Frankfurters, the cult stud community wastes no opportunity to marvel at the myriad sites of ‘resistance’ found in TV talk shows, sci-fi fandom, rock videos, fashion magazines, shopping malls, comic books, and the like, describing the most innocent-looking forms of entertainment as hotly contested battlegrounds of social conflict. Their books teem with stories of aesthetic hierarchies rudely overturned; with subversive shoppers dauntlessly using up the mall’s air conditioning; with heroic fans building their workers’ paradise right there in the Star Trek corpus; with rebellious readers of women’s fashion magazines symbolically smashing the state.¹⁴

It should go without saying that arguing against North’s distortion of the relationship between Critical Theory and postmodernism is not the same thing as a blanket defense of Critical Theory. But no one learns anything from a crude reductionism that lumps together intellectual tendencies that are very different and even, in many important respects, sharply opposed to each other. As we’ll see, however, that reductionism did serve a purpose for North – to open up a space for objectivism.

This becomes more apparent when we now go back to North’s other claim – i.e. that the root problem with Critical Theory was its divorce of economic base from ideological superstructure. Again what we encounter here is an oversimplification. Let us look more closely at North’s claim, specifically how he accounts for the degeneration of Critical Theory:

At least in the early stages of the development of Critical Theory, certain ideas developed by Lukacs and Korsch expressed a legitimate criticism of the objectivist tendencies that characterized the theoretical conceptions of the Second International. In these criticisms, Lukacs was not exceptionally original, as Lenin (especially in his *Philosophical Notebooks*) had criticized the neglect of Hegel and dialectics as far back as 1915. However, in the name of reviving Hegel and overcoming the objectivism of the Second International, the founders of Critical Theory increasingly called into question the emphasis placed by classical Marxism on the ultimately determining role of the economic base in the development of the political and cultural superstructure of society. They came to view this superstructure as essentially autonomous, operating independently of the economic base.

¹⁴ Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, pp. 282-3.

Reading this 13 years later, the words – “the neglect of Hegel and dialectics” – almost seem to jump out off the page. North connects this neglect to “the objectivist tendencies that characterized the theoretical conceptions of the Second International” – and yet, in all the years since this statement was written (and indeed for some time before then), *the same neglect* has characterized the theoretical work of the International Committee under North’s leadership. As we pointed out in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* and elsewhere, the publications of the IC are virtually bereft of any work on dialectics in the last 20 years. The philosophy archives of the WSWS (now a decade old) have exactly one article with Hegel in the headline, a book review by North which (as we showed in Chapter 3 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*¹⁵) actually perpetuates this neglect. As for another work mentioned by North here, Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* – again, there has not been a single lecture or article devoted to it in 20 years. (We might add that Trotsky’s philosophical notebooks from 1933-35, a major discovery from the Trotsky Archives at Harvard and first published in 1986, have been completely ignored by the IC.¹⁶) Given this record, it is obvious that if the neglect of dialectics manifested itself in the Second International as objectivism, the same was bound to happen in the IC.¹⁷

North only raised the neglect of dialectics in passing. His main theme was the idealist deviations of the Critical Theorists – their treatment of politics and culture as “essentially autonomous, operating independently of the economic base.” In the next paragraph he expands on this point, arguing that the defeats of the working class in the 20s and 30s, especially the Nazi takeover in Germany, had a decisive impact on Critical Theory:

These defeats were seen as the expression of a bewilderingly complex interaction of autonomous superstructural factors, largely beyond the control of any political movement, that rendered the working class impotent. All references to the “economic base” and “objective revolutionary situations” were dismissed as more or less meaningless, or, even worse, as expressions of economic determinism and vulgar materialism. Indeed, the entire emphasis placed by classical Marxism on the production relations of capitalism was dismissed as excessive and hardly capable of providing an understanding of the political and ideological superstructure of capitalist society.

North makes his case in broad strokes: he never cites or even mentions specific works. As we pointed out, the Frankfurt School was not a homogenous tendency, and when one adds Lukacs and Korsch to the mix, the picture becomes even more complicated. In any case, there is no question that after 1933, the outlook of the Frankfurters became increasingly pessimistic and they rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, notably in works like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (written in 1944, in the midst of the Nazi conflagration,) or Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, (written two decades later, at the height of the postwar boom). But was this pessimism the inevitable outcome of treating ideological forms as autonomous phenomena? As we noted earlier, the economic determinism of Social Democracy was a vulgarization of

¹⁵ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch03.pdf, pp. 78-87.

¹⁶ See “The Foreshadowing of *In Defense of Marxism*”, a commentary on these notebooks as well as excerpts from them, on our website: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/trotsky_notebooks.pdf.

¹⁷ It is also worth noting that North’s passing dig at Lukacs’s *History and Class Consciousness* is off the mark. When Lukacs first published that book in 1923, he had no access to Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*, which, though written in 1914-15, were only first published in 1929. Lukacs also had no access to Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which were only published in 1932. In light of that, *History and Class Consciousness* was remarkably original, and remains an important contribution to Marxist philosophy, albeit a flawed one.

Marxism precisely in its denying that there was any such autonomy. Clearly *some degree of autonomy* on the part of politics, culture, philosophy, psychology etc. *is essential* to Marxism. North, however, makes no effort to address this issue or even to raise it as a problem. Instead, he stacks the deck of his argument by defining autonomy as “operating independently of the economic base” which then turns into “a bewilderingly complex interaction of autonomous superstructural factors, largely beyond the control of any political movement, that rendered the working class impotent.” If that is what is meant by autonomy, then of course it is incompatible with Marxism. But then we are left with a quandary: the only choices available to us seem to be an autonomy that severs all connection to the economic base and an objectivism that denies any autonomy. To put it in philosophical terms, this is a choice between idealism on the one hand and mechanical materialism on the other. From the standpoint of Marxism these are both dead-ends, but there is, in the very posing of such a choice, an unstated assumption that mechanical materialism is at least ‘closer’ to Marxism. It is precisely in this way that a space for objectivism gets opened up. But objectivism isn’t any closer to Marxism: it too renders “the working class impotent”, since it cannot conceive of the political consciousness of the working class as anything other than a passive reflection of objective conditions.

In any case, the choice itself is false: treating ideological forms as autonomous does not necessarily lead to abandoning the revolutionary role of the working class. In fact one can find a striking claim for the autonomy of political consciousness in, of all places, the opening section of *The Transitional Program*:

The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat. The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind’s productive forces stagnate ... All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet “ripened” for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only “ripened”; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.¹⁸

This famous passage presents a stark contrast between economic conditions and political consciousness: on the one hand, the “objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ‘ripened’; they have begun to get somewhat rotten”; on the other hand, political consciousness, far from ripening, has been thrown into a new crisis – “the crisis of revolutionary leadership.” This only makes sense if there is a significant degree of autonomy between the objective conditions and the political consciousness of the working class: in other words, objective conditions on their own cannot produce the socialist consciousness in the working class needed to make the revolution. And Trotsky’s point in writing *The Transitional Program* was to address that problem of political consciousness: “It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution,” he declares in the program. The reason that such a bridge is necessary is because

¹⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/index.htm>.

revolutionary political consciousness is not something pre-determined by objective conditions, no matter how ripe or even rotten-ripe the latter are.

In some of his discussions on *The Transitional Program*, Trotsky elaborated on this point. (Stenographic reports of these discussions in 1938 with James Cannon and the American Trotskyist leaders were published in the 1970s.) While repeatedly insisting that “we must tell workers the truth” and that a Marxist program could never adapt itself to the backwardness of the working class, he also argued that it was essential to understand and find ways to engage the consciousness of workers. Posing the question, “how to present the program to workers?”, he answers:

It is naturally very important. We must combine politics with mass psychology and pedagogy, build a bridge to their minds. Only experience can show how to advance in this or that part of the country. For some time we must try to concentrate the attention of the workers on one slogan: sliding scale of wages and hours. The empiricism of the American workers has given political parties great success with one or two slogans, single tax, bimetallism, they spread like wild fire in the masses. When they see the panacea fail, then they wait for a new one. Now we can present one which is honest, part of our entire program, not demagogic, but which corresponds totally to the situation.¹⁹

So for Trotsky, building a bridge to the minds of workers meant combining “politics with mass psychology and pedagogy,” and he provided an interesting example of such a combination with his proposal to focus on the single demand of a sliding scale of wages and hours (or 30 for 40, as this came to be known – 30 hours work for 40 hours pay). The point he made about the “empiricism of the American workers” is not only astute, but directly relevant to this discussion. Trotsky wasn’t adapting to that empiricism but he also wasn’t ignoring it or dismissing it out of hand: it was necessary to engage the consciousness of workers if Marxists were ever to find a road to the masses. Thus Trotsky takes what in other circumstances would be a weakness – the fondness of the workers for panaceas – and tries to turn this into a bridge to socialist consciousness. Put into more updated language, what Trotsky was arguing for here was a socialist slogan that could ‘catch on’ with the masses. But of course this ‘panacea’, unlike those of the middle class populists of the past, “corresponds totally” to the objective needs of the workers and leads to a growing awareness of the need for a revolutionary confrontation with capitalism as a whole.

In another of these discussions on *The Transitional Program*, Trotsky talked about the disconnect between the objective conditions and the state of consciousness of the workers, which the program was intended to address:

The inner contradictions of American capitalism – the crisis and unemployment – are incomparably more mature for a revolution than the consciousness of the American workers. These are the two poles of the situation ... [Mass consciousness] remains backward in comparison with the objective conditions. We know that the subjective conditions – the consciousness of the masses, the growth of the revolutionary party – are not a fundamental factor. It depends

¹⁹ “Discussions with Leon Trotsky on the Transitional Program: The Political Backwardness of the American Workers”, May 19, 1938, in Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (Pathfinder: 1974), pp. 127-8.

upon the objective situation, in the last instance the subjective element itself depends upon the objective conditions, but this dependence is not a simple process.²⁰

These remarks are useful in regard to the issue of economic determinism. When Trotsky speaks about “the consciousness of the masses” and “the growth of the revolutionary party” as not being “a fundamental factor,” he is of course not suggesting that they aren’t important. Here we need to keep in mind that these are unedited transcripts of oral discussions, and that by “fundamental” what he probably had in mind was something closer to ‘foundational’, i.e. relating to the economic foundations of society. In the other discussion we cited earlier, he made a similar point: “The mentality of the class of the proletariat is backward but the mentality is not such a substance as the factories, the mines, the railroads, but is more mobile and under the blows of the objective crisis, the millions of unemployed, it can change rapidly.”²¹ In short, the consciousness of the workers and the growth of the party (which is itself the growth of revolutionary consciousness among the workers) are subjective factors as opposed to the objective economic contradictions at the base of society. And of course Trotsky insists that this “subjective element” depends upon objective conditions “in the last instance”, but he adds a significant qualifier: “this dependence is not a simple process.” This qualifier is the dividing line between Marxism and objectivism; indeed, one could say that the very need to have a *Transitional Program* in the first place arises because of this qualifier. And Trotsky emphasizes that these are “the two poles of the situation” – i.e. the ‘ripeness’ of objective situation as opposed to the backwardness of mass consciousness. It is a point he comes back to repeatedly in this discussion:

The most important [thing] is that we have in the whole world as we have in the US this disproportion between the objective and subjective factor, but it was never as acute as now.²²

Of course Trotsky makes it abundantly clear that this lagging behind of the subjective factor was due primarily to the betrayals of the reformists and Stalinists. Indeed to illustrate his point about the disproportion between the objective and subjective factors, he cited the example of the French workers who were in a revolutionary situation in the mid-1930s: “The workers were ready to do everything, to go to the limit”, but in the end their revolutionary offensive was diverted and ultimately smothered by the Popular Front. But exposing and denouncing the treachery of the labor bureaucracies was only part of the responsibility of the revolutionary movement: it was also necessary to develop an alternative leadership to those bureaucracies, and that could only be done by building bridges to socialist consciousness for the masses. In other words, it was an essential part of revolutionary practice for the party to do what it could – through its participation in the mass struggles of the working class – to overcome this disproportion between the objective and subjective factors. Trotsky spells this out in terms that recall his remark cited earlier about combining “politics with mass psychology and pedagogy”:

What is the sense of the transitional program? We can call it a program of action, but for us, for our strategic conception, it is a transitional program – it is a help to the masses in overcoming the inherited ideas, methods, and forms and of adapting themselves to the exigencies of the objective situation.²³

²⁰ “A Summary of Transitional Demands,” March 23, 1938, in Trotsky, op.cit, p. 234.

²¹ “The Political Backwardness of the American Workers,” p. 127.

²² “A Summary of Transitional Demands”, p. 234.

²³ Ibid, p. 235.

Trotsky then goes back to something he had raised at the outset of the discussion, i.e. that “some comrades had the impression that some of my propositions or demands were opportunistic, and others that they were too revolutionary, not corresponding to the objective situation.” Trotsky’s answer to those concerns is as follows:

That is why some demands appear very opportunistic – because they are adapted to the actual mentality of the workers. That is why other demands appear too revolutionary – because they reflect more the objective situation than the actual mentality of the workers. It is our duty to make this gap between objective and subjective factors as short as possible. That is why I cannot overestimate the importance of the transitional program.²⁴

If one wanted the core idea of *The Transitional Program* summed up in one phrase, it would be this: ***“It is our duty to make this gap between objective and subjective factors as short as possible.”*** To that end, the objections that some of the demands were “very opportunistic” or that others were “too revolutionary” were complementary examples of non-dialectical thinking, either ignoring the need to engage “the actual mentality of the workers” or ignoring the requirements of the objective situation. *The Transitional Program* was aimed at bridging that divide between subjective and objective, and in that respect it represented one of Trotsky’s most important contributions to Marxism.

Of course *The Transitional Program* was, as Trotsky emphasized, the distillation of the experience of Bolshevism, but it needs to be kept in mind how profound a break the latter was from the objectivism of classical Social Democracy. That break was already present, in embryonic form, in *What is to be done?* and the split between Bolshevism and Menshevism, but the full implications only became evident in the aftermath of the debacle of August 1914. It was then that attention to the subjective factor assumed enormous importance. Going back to what we said earlier about the supposed ‘choice’ between idealism and vulgar materialism, it became evident to Lenin in this period that the latter was as antithetical to Marxism and as deadly to revolutionary politics as the former. This is what led Lenin to his study of Hegel and dialectics contained in his *Philosophical Notebooks*. That study provided Lenin with a theoretical framework to rearm the movement politically, leading directly to two of his most important works – his book on *Imperialism and State and Revolution*.²⁵ But in a larger sense, it was the theoretical basis for Lenin’s role in leading the October Revolution. In other words, a turn to dialectics – and specifically an understanding of the dialectical relationship of subject and object – was an essential precondition for enabling the proletariat to become the *revolutionary subject* of history.

But Lenin’s theoretical work in this regard was hardly the last word on the issue (the more so since his *Notebooks* were unpublished and unknown until 1929). The decade of the 1920s was full of political turmoil throughout Europe, with revolutionary opportunities thwarted by the Social Democrats (and later the Stalinists) or squandered by the political inexperience of the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ In Chapter 3 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, we contrasted Lenin’s *Imperialism* with one of its key sources, *Finance Capital*, written by leading German Social Democrat Rudolf Hilferding. While in many respects, these two books examined the same facts, the political conclusions they drew were diametrically opposed. For Hilferding these were facts and nothing more, a new stage of capitalism to be taken note of; for Lenin on the other hand, these facts also contained the potential for the revolutionary intervention of the working class. See: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch03.pdf, pp. 71-3.

early Communist parties. Under these conditions, a turn to dialectics and to an understanding of the subjective factor in revolution remained a pressing concern. This is the context in which the founding text of Critical Theory, Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, came out in 1923. It would take us too far afield to provide a proper account of that text, but it deserves to be said that the picture that North paints of Critical Theory as divorcing ideological superstructure from economic base in such a way as to render "the working class impotent" doesn't at all apply to Lukacs's book. Indeed, far from ignoring the economic base, Lukacs brilliantly developed Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism into the category of reification, as well as reconstructing the Marxist theory of alienation a decade before Marx's own writings on alienation, i.e. the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, came to light. Lukacs thereby provided a powerful insight into the way in which the social relations of capitalism mystify the consciousness of the working class. But Lukacs's analysis, while confronting the problems of why the consciousness of workers is so commonly at odds with their objective interests, also demonstrated how the same social relations that mystify workers offer opportunities for breakthroughs in class consciousness, and how the role of the party is crucial in that process.

A decade ago an unpublished manuscript of Lukacs's (probably written in 1925 or 1926) came to light, which was a defense of *History and Class Consciousness* against the torrent of attacks it provoked from the emerging bureaucratic forces inside the Soviet Union and the Comintern. The book, translated into English in 2000, is called *Tailism and the Dialectic*. It is interesting (though not surprising) to see that the attacks on Lukacs by the forces of 'orthodoxy' took essentially the same line as Plekhanov's attack on *What is to be done?*. Lukacs had insightful things to say about those attacks, and it is useful to quote a few of his remarks in the context of this discussion of the North-Walsh controversy, and indeed in the broader context of our polemic with North. (In the first quote Lukacs refers to his two leading 'orthodox' opponents – Abram Deborin, a Russian philosopher and ex-Menshevik, and Lazslo Rudas, a Hungarian Communist Party official):

Every time an opportunistic attack is made on the revolutionary dialectic, it proceeds under the banner – against subjectivism. (Bernstein against Marx, Kautsky against Lenin.) Among the many *isms* that Deborin and Rudas attribute to me (idealism, agnosticism, eclecticism, etc.) subjectivism takes pride of place. In the following exposition I will prove that what is at stake is actually always the question of the role of the party in the revolution, and that Deborin and Rudas wage war against Bolshevism when they believe that they are fighting my 'subjectivism' ...

How is it possible even to imagine Lenin's basic idea of the preparation and organization of revolution without such an *active and conscious* role of the subjective moment? And who could possibly imagine without this function of the subjective moment Lenin's conception of the decisive moments of the revolution – that is the doctrine that stems from Marx but is first made concrete by Lenin – that insurrection is an art? And were not all the reproaches cast against Lenin (even from Rosa Luxemburg) precisely determined by the view that the revolution would come about through economic forces, so to speak 'by itself', that is to say, in other words, 'spontaneously', 'from the base', without the decisive role of *conscious subjective* elements?²⁶

²⁶ Georg Lukacs, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, pp. 48, 57.

Thus at its outset, Critical Theory was an effort to employ the dialectic in much the same manner as Lenin had in 1914-15 – i.e. to shed light on “the decisive role of *conscious subjective* elements” in making the revolution. This brought the question of political consciousness to the forefront, and the terrible defeats and betrayals suffered by the working class in the 1920s and 1930s only underscored its significance. As we saw earlier, near the end of this period, in 1938, Trotsky was characterizing “the disproportion between the subjective and objective factor” as being “never as acute as now.” For the exponents of Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School who came after Lukacs, as well as the Freudo-Marxists (who included Fromm and Otto Fenichel, both having ties to the Frankfurt School, as well Wilhelm Reich), the attempt to confront this disproportion led them to Freudian psychoanalysis, because of the insights it could offer about mass psychology, as well as to an analysis of the mass culture industries and (later) consumer society.

As we discussed in Chapters 9 and 10 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, the legacy of these intellectuals is a very mixed one. Often the questions they asked were more important and insightful than the answers they provided. (A good example is the question that forms the title of Reich’s 1934 pamphlet, *What is class consciousness?*, discussed in Chapter 10 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*.²⁷) For most of them Trotskyism was a huge blind spot; worse still was the case of Lukacs, who remained an unrepentant Stalinist to his dying day. The Frankfurters ended up in the theoretical impasse of ‘Marxism without the proletariat’, which either led to the deep pessimism and political quiescence of Adorno or to the quixotic and hopeless quest by Marcuse to find an alternative revolutionary subject (i.e. students, blacks, Third World bourgeois nationalists). But Lenin’s characterization of philosophical idealism, from his wonderful essay, “On the Question of Dialectics” in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, applies to Critical Theory:

[I]t is a *sterile flower* undoubtedly, but a sterile flower that grows on the living tree of living, fertile, genuine, powerful, omnipotent, objective, absolute human knowledge.²⁸

It was the strength of the Critical Theorists that they brought dialectical analysis to bear on the subjective factor, i.e. on psychology, the culture industry, consumerism, etc. (A notable example of this is Marcuse’s brilliant reading of Freud in *Eros and Civilization* [1955].) Marxism in the 21st century is neither conceivable nor viable without assimilating the best insights of these thinkers. Here it is worth noting that the term ‘Classical Marxism’ is in danger of being overused and abused. While it has some legitimacy as a quick reference for the Marxism of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, it isn’t a term that any of these figures would ever have used themselves. (Ironically, the term was coined by Isaac Deutscher, himself an apostate from Trotskyism.) For the great Marxists, the Marxism they adhered to was a fully contemporary revolutionary doctrine, not a ‘classical’ one. Reading the theoretical and polemical material of the International Committee these days, it would almost seem as if the primary task of Marxists in the 21st century is to preserve Classical Marxism. This is deeply misguided: it fosters a conservative and indeed almost theological conception whereby any ideas that can’t be directly validated by reference to the canonical texts of Classical Marxism are thereby automatically deemed to be alien to Marxism. By this standard, neither *What is to be done?* nor the theory of

²⁷ pp. 274-280.

²⁸ Lenin, “On the Question of Dialectics,” in *Collected Works*, v. 38: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/misc/x02.htm>.

permanent revolution would have ever seen the light of day. The only way to preserve the heritage of Marxism is to renew and develop it – and that means, among other things, assimilating the insights into subjectivity that can be gained from Critical Theory.

But such a creative development of Marxism isn't possible (or desirable) in a movement mired in objectivism and abstentionism. A good example of the problem is the very question that sparked the controversy between North and Walsh – i.e. vulgar economic determinism. North criticizes the latter in a formulaic manner, and this is typically how the issue is dealt with – in general and abstract terms, with perhaps a quote from Engels tossed in to provide a bit of substance. In fact this kind of 'criticism' is devoid of any serious thought: it never rises much beyond a statement of the obvious, which is that vulgar economic determinism – as indeed vulgar anything – is not a good thing. It also misrepresents the problem. Vulgar materialism encompassed a good deal more than just a naïve belief in an automatic correspondence between political consciousness and objective conditions. The leading theoreticians of the Second International, men like Kautsky and Plekhanov, were far more sophisticated than that, capable of important theoretical work in a range of fields including the history of religion (Kautsky) or artistic criticism (Plekhanov). But they were nonetheless vulgar materialists because their work never confronted the subjective factor, never dealt with the question of how "men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."

It is therefore appropriate to speak not only of vulgar materialism but also of *a vulgar critique of vulgar materialism*. Such a critique trivializes the problem of vulgar materialism and avoids the creative development of Marxism necessary to overcome it. Here it is worth citing some remarks about vulgar materialism by Russell Jacoby, a social historian and follower of Marcuse's, from his historical account of Western Marxism, *Dialectic of Defeat*:

In the Marxist tradition a searching critique of the 'secondary' characteristics of capitalism is lacking. Secondary refers to those features that stand once removed from the primary economic organization of wages, working conditions, imperialism, and the market. It refers to a series of relations, such as urbanism, mass media, psychological life, and leisure. *These are not necessarily second in importance, but are second in that they cannot exist apart from the basic political-economic organization of society.* In recent decades these areas have increasingly drawn the attention of Marxists, but earlier Marxists ignored them. The few analyses offered have been pedestrian and predictable. The secondary features have been disposed of by concepts taken from the basic dictionary of Marxism: superstructure, relations of production, accumulation, and so on. *If none of these concepts have been wrong, none have grasped the specificity of the phenomenon* (all emphases added).²⁹

Jacoby makes two important points here. First, the conception about base and superstructure (or primary and secondary features of capitalism) is a conception about dependence *but not about importance*. Secondary features cannot exist independently of primary ones, but this does not make them any less important. An analogous point can be made with regard to the relationship between psychology and physiology: human consciousness cannot exist independently of the brain, but this does not make consciousness any less important than – or reducible to – the neurological functioning of the brain. (In fact, just such a reductionism – i.e. a vulgar

²⁹ Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat*, p. 31.

materialism – dominates the field of neuroscience, whereby mental illness, and indeed all of mental life, is conceived in terms of neurons and synapses, biochemistry, genetics, etc. I discussed the debilitating impact this has had in my article, “Mental illness and the American dream.”) Such reductionism ignores the dialectical transformation of quantity into quality, a point explained by Trotsky in his *Notebooks 1933-35*.³⁰

(In regards to reductionism, it is useful to cite a distinction made by the prominent American biologist Carl Woese between empirical reductionism and fundamentalist reductionism:

Empirical reductionism is in essence methodological; it is simply a mode of analysis, the dissection of a biological entity or system into its constituent parts in order to better understand it. Empirical reductionism makes no assumptions about the fundamental nature ... of living things. Fundamentalist reductionism ... on the other hand, is in essence metaphysical. It is ipso facto a statement about the nature of the world: living systems (like all else) can be completely understood in terms of the properties of their constituent parts.³¹

What Woese calls fundamentalist reductionism is what Marxists mean by vulgar materialism. The conception that one can understand any system “completely” by reducing it to its constituent parts ignores the transformation that occurs when those parts constitute a new quality, a new whole.)

The second (and related) point Jacoby makes is that this sort of reductionism makes it impossible to understand “the specificity of the phenomenon.” A good illustration of this comes up in Trotsky’s famous debate with the advocates of proletarian culture (*Class and Art*, 1924), where he used the example of Dante to make the point that while the great poet was indeed a 13th century Florentine petty bourgeois, not every 13th century Florentine petty bourgeois was a

³⁰ The relevant passage from the Notebooks is as follows:

The brain is the material substrate of consciousness. Does this mean that consciousness is simply a form of “manifestation” of the physiological processes in the brain? If this were the state of affairs, then one would have to ask: What is the need for consciousness? If consciousness has no *independent* function, which rises *above* physiological processes in the brain and nerves, then it is unnecessary, useless; it is harmful because it is a superfluous complication—and what a complication! The presence of consciousness and its crowning by logical thought can be biologically and socially “justified” only in the event that it yields positive vital results beyond those which are achieved by the system of unconscious reflexes. This presupposes not only the autonomy of consciousness (within certain limits) from automatic processes in the brain and nerves, but the ability of consciousness to influence the action and functions of the body as well ... [B]y itself the method of psychoanalysis, taking as its point of departure “the autonomy” of psychological phenomena, in no way contradicts materialism. Quite the contrary, it is precisely dialectical materialism that prompts us to the idea that the psyche could not even be formed unless it played an autonomous, that is, within certain limits, an independent role in the life of the individual and the species. All the same, we approach here some sort of critical point, a break in all the gradualness, a transition from quantity to quality: the psyche, arising from matter, is “freed” from the determinism of matter, so that it can independently—by its own laws—influence matter.

Wilhelm Reich made a similar argument against reductionism in the 1929 lectures he gave in the Soviet Union, which were published as *Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis*.

³¹ Quoted in Gary Greenberg, “A Mind of its Own: Resisting the tyranny of the brain”, *Harper’s Magazine*, June 2008, p. 86.

Dante.³² In other words, though the statement about Dante's class position was certainly true, such a 'class analysis' misses the mark because it ignores the "specificity" of his artistic achievement.

That same missing-of-the-mark happens whenever the relative autonomy of superstructural features is ignored. As we showed in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, this is exactly what has happened in the theory and practice of the International Committee with regard to the politically central issue of class consciousness in the working class. Vulgar materialism isn't some quaint, old annoyance that can be dismissed with a passing remark: it is, in the form of positivism, *a default position of bourgeois ideology*. The vulgar critique of vulgar materialism ignores this, which means that it ignores the theoretical work necessary to resist and overcome vulgar materialism.³³ A movement that never gets beyond such a vulgar critique is condemned to succumb to vulgar materialism. That is just what has happened in the years since 1995 inside the International Committee.

A final word is in order about Walsh. In going back to this old controversy between him and North, it isn't my purpose to imply that Walsh has any sympathy for our positions. There is no public record that Walsh made any efforts after 1995 to resist North's increasingly objectivist inclinations. And like all the other older cadres in the International Committee, Walsh has had nothing to say about the current polemical dispute we are having with North, which has been going on now for five years. Even if these comrades agreed entirely with North, their silence is deplorable: they have chosen to abstain completely when faced with the most serious and wide-ranging critique of the IC's politics in decades. Clearly the prevailing attitude among these comrades is that this is 'North's business'. But to some extent this silence is also indicative of a guilty conscience: some of these comrades are well aware that our criticisms are valid and that North's response to them is rife with intellectual dishonesty. Their 'loyalty' to North under these circumstances is the antithesis of the kind of loyalty that should prevail within a revolutionary movement: political principles have become less important to this 'old guard' than maintaining longstanding personal (and financial) relationships. A cadre that operates on this basis is finished as a revolutionary force. The silence of the old guard is as much a sign of the political

³² L. Trotsky, Class and Art: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/05/art.htm>. What Trotsky actually said was as follows:

Dante was, of course, the product of a certain social milieu. But Dante was a genius. He raised the experience of his epoch to a tremendous artistic height. And if we, while today approaching other works of medieval literature merely as objects of study, approach the *Divine Comedy* as a source of artistic perception, this happens not because Dante was a Florentine petty bourgeois of the 13th century but, to a considerable extent, in spite of that circumstance.

³³ Jacoby argues that the underlying problem with vulgar materialism in the Marxist tradition is not a methodological problem but rather stems from the "complicity of orthodox Marxism in bourgeois industrialization." What he means by this is that orthodox Marxists did not perceive the superstructural features of capitalism as being in need of fundamental change: "The Marxists would inherit the cities and the mass newspapers; only the signs and headlines would be changed. Rockefeller Plaza would become Leninplatz" (*Dialectic of Defeat*, p. 31). While this kind of criticism has some legitimacy (I discussed this issue in terms of the Marxist attitude to economic growth in my essay, *To know a thing is to know its end*), Jacoby is far too quick to dismiss the significance of methodological problems and the debilitating influence of bourgeois philosophical conceptions on the revolutionary workers' movement. The latter is clearly the crucial issue in understanding the controversy between North and Walsh that I have been discussing here.

degeneration of the International Committee as North's shameless defense of objectivism and abstentionism.

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